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Utility Breeds Culture of Success by Promoting Leadership Skills

A string of awards in recent years serves as proof this Oregon utility is raising its leaders right

By **Jared Raney**

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Matthew Chasteen on the job. (Photo Courtesy of RUSA)

Three employees in as many years have been awarded Operator of the Year at Roseburg Urban Sanitary Authority. The Oregon utility puts a lot of stock in leadership — and it seems to be paying off.

Matthew Chasteen, collections crew supervisor, recently was awarded two Operator of the Year awards from two regional trade organizations: the Umpqua Basin Operators Section and the Oregon Region of the Pacific Northwest Clean Water Agency.

After almost a decade at RUSA, Chasteen became the obvious choice for collections crew supervisor. One of the first steps they took to prepare him was a leadership course through American Public Works Association.

This is just one example of a culture that promotes and invests in leadership, and a culture that has produced multiple award-winning employees.

All about attitude



Matthew Chasteen (left) with David Keil, president of the Pacific Northwest Clean Water Agency. (Photo Courtesy of RUSA)

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Following four years in the Marines and more than a decade working at a dairy processing facility, you could say Chasteen was poised for success when he joined the wastewater industry for the first time with RUSA. You could also say he had no idea what he was getting into.

“Matt came to us with zero experience in this industry, about 10 years ago,” says Stephen Lusch, collections system superintendent. “He’s just that type of guy, always wanting to learn, always wanting to improve himself.”

Chasteen embraced the utility's leadership philosophy, quickly taking on more and more responsibility until he became an obvious successor to the previous supervisor.

"I started at RUSA as an entry-level worker, and was slowly given more responsibility," Chasteen says.

RUSA isn't afraid to train from scratch, building its employees up brick by brick. RUSA looks for attitude above experience, and Lusch appears to have a knack for spotting the right kind of talent.

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"I didn't know anything from anything, when I first started. But, as I tell all my kids, common sense will get you a long way in this world," Chasteen says with a laugh. "So that's kind of my way — you take something and do your best at it. Steve's really good about seeing potential in people and trying to cultivate that."

He certainly saw it in Chasteen, leading him along a short upward trajectory culminating in the two operator of the year awards.

"Because of his competency and his willingness to learn — he really has the initiative to learn the industry, and always improve himself — he moved up in the ranks up to department supervisor," Lusch says

A winning program

Lusch has a habit of picking leaders and promoting them through the department. Chasteen is the third member of RUSA to be profiled by *MSW* for earning operator of the year recognition in the last three years.

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"He's somebody that wants to increase your knowledge. He gives you an opportunity to do that," Chasteen says. "Steve would give me small tasks, or small little projects to complete. So I just worked my way up."

The leadership course that Chasteen attended after his promotion to supervisor was a series of one-week conferences over the course of about six months. It's a sizable commitment for a relatively small municipality, but as they've proven, it's a philosophy that has paid off.

"I was excited to take over the position, because there were a lot of things I wanted to try, that in my position before, I couldn't," Chasteen says. "So being in a position to try some new things and see how they worked, that appealed to me."

In order to make those changes, he makes a point of returning to his leadership training on a regular basis, getting the most out of their investment.

"I try to make a habit of looking through the notes I made to myself," he says. "They paid money to send me, and to make me a better supervisor, and I want to make sure that I'm taking advantage of the stuff I learned there. Sometimes you've got to look back on things. I get my head down, busy on the task at hand, and sometimes I have to slow down and look at the bigger picture."

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At 47, already advanced to supervisor with two Operator of the Year awards under his belt, RUSA's culture of leadership has not only produced a great employee in Chasteen, but has also ensured that the promotional mentality and culture will continue beyond Lusch's influence.

"The role of a leader is looking for potential in people that are working under you, and grooming them to become leaders themselves," Chasteen says. "I want to be the type of supervisor that people want to do their best for, and that people want to make look good."

Prepared for challenge

As collections crew supervisor, Chasteen manages and schedules a six-man collections team, which includes four operators and a CCTV specialist in addition to himself.

He also coordinates with other departments when necessary on large projects that fall outside day-to-day operations.

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"Trying to get everything done in a timely manner, and with who we have, is our biggest challenge," Chasteen says. "It seems like there's always more getting put on our plate. So trying to get things prioritized and get things done, and being flexible, I guess would be another thing. I don't take it personally if the schedule I put time into making for the week gets shredded on Monday morning, because that's just the way things go."

The RUSA crew is responsible for 10,000 acres, 160 miles of mainline, 11,000 connections and more than 4,100 manholes. The system includes nine pump stations, 4,150 manholes and 160 miles of sewer main from 4 to 42 inches. RUSA's wastewater treatment plant provides full secondary treatment and nutrient removal and has a design capacity of 7.9 mgd.

RUSA uses a CCTV outfitted with Envirosight, combo machines from SuperProducts and AquaTech, in conjunction with ArcGIS mapping software and Lucity asset management.

Not about the recognition

As for the award, Chasteen doesn't need accolades to feel good about the work he's doing.

“There are people in this world that want to be proud of their work, and then there are other people that just want to get their work done and go home. So you learn who to pay attention to and who not,” Chasteen says.

“Frankly, it felt a little embarrassing to win the award. I guess I have mixed feelings as far as that goes,” he says with a laugh. “But it's always nice to be appreciated.”



Matthew Chasteen on the job. (Photo Courtesy of RUSA)